

Guide to Japanese Verb Tenses

3-13-15

RU verbs and U Verbs

Ru verbs end in *iru* or *eru*; you **don't double the 't'** when making their *te* or *ta* forms. For example, *taberu* = 'eat', *tabete* = 'eating', *tabeta* = 'ate'.

Unfortunately, **u verbs** aren't as easy to define. **Most u verbs don't end in 'ru,' but a number of them do.** For example, the following verbs are all u verbs: *ganbaru* ('do one's best'), *suwaru* ('sit'), *noru* ('board a vehicle'), *toru* ('take'), *hairu* ('enter'), *hashiru* ('run'), *iru* ('need'), *kiru* ('cut'), *shiru* ('know') and *kaeru* ('return'). What these verbs have in common is that you **double the 't'** when making their *te* or *ta* forms. For example, the verb *shiru* = 'know.' Its *te* form is *shitte* ('knowing'). Its *ta* form is *shitta* ('knew'). The **double t's** tell us that it's a **u verb**.

The **root** of a verb is the pre-u or pre-ru form. For verbs ending in au, iu, or ou, the root adds a 'w' when making the negative form, e.g., *kawanai* ('won't buy'), *iwanai* ('won't say'), *omowanai* ('won't think'). The root also adds a 'w' when making the passive form, causative and causative passive forms, e.g., *kawareru* ('buy on'), *kawaseru* ('make buy') and *kawaserareru* ('be made to buy uncomfortably'). However, the root does **not** add a 'w' when making the 'let's' or 'I shall' form, e.g., *kaoo* ('let's buy'), *ioo* ('let's say'), *omooo* ('let's think'), when making the eba form, e.g., *kaeba* ('if I buy'), *ieba* ('if I say') and *omoeba* ('if I think'), or when making the potential form, e.g., *kaeru* ('able to buy'), *ieru* ('able to say'), and *omoeru* ('able to think'). For verbs ending in *tsu*, the root is the pre-su form. For example, the root of *tatsu* ('stand') is *tat*. *Tatanai* = 'won't stand.' *Tatoo* = 'let's stand.' *Tateba* = 'if I stand.'

The **stem** of a verb is the pre-masu form. For an ru verb, the root and the stem are the same. For example, *taberu* = *tabemasu* = 'eat.' Its root is its pre-ru form, or *tabe*. Its stem is its pre-masu form, which is also *tabe*. By way of contrast, *nomu* = *nomimasu* = 'drink.' Its root is its pre-u form, or *nom*. Its stem is its pre-masu form, or *nomi*.

The **e rule** says that, looking at transitive/intransitive verb pairs, **transitive verbs tend to end in eru**, e.g., *akeru* ('open') is transitive and *aku* ('open') is intransitive; *shimeru* ('close') is transitive and *shimaru* ('close') is intransitive. **But su usually trumps eru** in determining which verb is transitive, e.g., *kesu* ('turn on') is transitive and *kieru* ('go on') is intransitive; *dasu* ('put out') is transitive and *deru* ('go out') is intransitive; *nekasu* ('put to sleep') is transitive and *neru* ('go to sleep') is intransitive; *kowasu* ('break') is transitive and *kowareru* ('break') is intransitive.

Apparent **exceptions** to the e rule include *kiru* ('cut') is transitive and *kireru* ('be cut') is intransitive; *uru* ('sell') is transitive and *ureru* ('be sold') is intransitive; *nuru* ('paint') is transitive and *nureru* ('get wet') is intransitive. These intransitive exceptions all seem to be **potential** forms (see the discussion of the potential tense on the next page) of their related transitive verbs, i.e., *kireru* also = 'able to cut'; *ureru* also = 'able to sell'; and *nureru* also = 'able to paint.' Perhaps they have acquired new meanings, in addition to their **potential** meanings, with the passage of time.

The te form of **intransitive** verbs is always followed by *imasu*, whether describing an ongoing action or a fixed condition. For example, *mado ga aite imasu* can mean either 'the window is opening' or 'the window is open.' *Aite* is the te form of *aku* ('open,' intransitive). Note that, since *aku* is an

intransitive verb, you can never say ~~mado ga akete arimasu~~.

Similarly, the te form of **transitive** verbs is also followed by **imasu**, when describing an **ongoing action**, e.g. *mado o akete imasu* = 'I am opening the window.'

However, the **transitive aru rule** says that the te form of **transitive** verbs is usually followed by **arimasu** when describing a **fixed condition**. For example, *mado o akete arimasu* = 'the window is open' (by someone). (*Mado ga akete arimasu* is also OK, since you may use either *o* or *ga* after the direct object of a transitive verb when describing a fixed condition.)

Unfortunately, **some verbs are exceptions to the transitive aru rule**, e.g., *Hajimete imasu* = 'it is started' (by someone).

Nakushite imasu = 'it is lost' (by someone).

Another exception occurs when you want to **imply that *the speaker* performed the action** resulting in the fixed condition. In that

case, you can use *imasu* with a **transitive** verb, e.g., *mado o akete imasu* = 'the window is open' (by me).

Saying 'if' or 'when'

To express the idea of '**if, then,**' for u verbs, add *eba* to the root. For ru verbs: add *reba* to the root. For example, *nomu* = 'I drink').

Nomeba = 'if I drink, then ...' *Akeru* = 'I open.'
Akereba = 'if I open, then ...'

To express the idea of '**if**' or '**when,**' add *ra* to the plain speech past form of a verb or adjective. This is called the **tara** form. For example, the plain past form of *taberu* ('eat') is *tabeta* ('ate'). Adding *ra*, we get *tabetara* = 'if I eat' or 'when I eat.' The plain past form of *nomu* ('drink') is *nonda* ('drank'). Adding *ra*, we get *nondara* = 'if I drink' or 'when I drink.'
Samui = 'cold.' The plain past form is *samukatta* = 'it was cold.' Adding *ra*, we get *samukattara* = 'if it's cold' or 'when it's cold.'

Another way to express the idea of 'if' or 'when' is to add **to** to a plain non-past verb. For example, *nomu to* = 'if I drink' or 'when I drink.' *Akeru to* = 'if I open' or 'when I open.' However, don't use *to* or *eba* before a request, suggestion, wish etc. For example, you cannot say ~~*oosaka ni iku to, okashi o katte kudasai*~~ = 'if you go to Osaka, please buy sweets.' Nor can you say ~~*oosaka ni ikeba, okashi o katte kudasai*~~. Instead you may say *oosaka ni ittara, okashi o katte kudasai*.

Use **tara** to sound more personal. For example, *tabako o suttara karada ni yokunai desu* = 'if you smoke, it's not good for the body.' Use **to** to sound more impersonal. For example, *tabako o suu to karada ni yokunai desu* = 'if one smokes, it's not good for the body.' Use **to** to give directions or talk about natural laws. For example, *fuyu ni naru to, samuku narimasu* = 'when it becomes winter, it becomes cold.'

To say '**in case it is,**' add ***nara*** to a noun, adjective or verb. For example, *eki mae ni aru ginkoo nara, dokodemo ii desu yo* = 'in the case of exist-in-front-of-the-station banks, anywhere is good for sure.'

After i adjectives and verbs, you may use *no nara* or '*n nara*. For example, *samuin nara ikimasen* = 'if it's cold, I won't go.'

Another way to say '**in case it is**' is to add ***dattara*** to a noun, adjective or verb. For example, *sono heya ga kirei dattara karimasu* = 'if that room is clean, I'll rent it.'

The potential tense

To show that something is possible (**potential tense**) for **u verbs**, add ***eru*** to the root. For example, *nomu* = 'drink.' *Nomeru* = *nomemasu* = 'I can drink.'

To show that something is possible for **ru verbs**, add ***rareru*** to the root. For example, *akeru* = 'open' (transitive). *Akerareru* =

akeraremasu = 'I can open.' *Rareru* can be shortened to ***reru***, meaning that you can remove the 'ar.' The three irregular verbs are: *Ikareru* = *ikaremasu* = *ikeru* = *ikemasu* = 'I can go.' *Korareru* = *koraremasu* = *koreru* = *koremasu* = 'I can come.' *Dekiru* = *dekimasu* = 'I can do.'

When using potential verbs, you may follow nouns with either *ga* or *o*; e.g., *tegami o kakeru* = *tegami ga kakeru* = 'I can write a letter.'

Tari

One way to express the idea of 'etcetera' is to add ***tari*** to the past stems of plain speech verbs and adjectives. Follow the last listed item (if you are listing more than one) with *suru* or *desu*. For example, *kaimono o shitari sooji o shitari shimasu* = 'he's doing shopping, doing laundry, etc.' *Tabetari nondari desu* = 'she's eating, sleeping etc.'

Tari can also be used to mean 'sometimes it is; sometimes it isn't.' For example, *isogashikattari hima dattari desu* = 'sometimes it's busy; sometimes it's free time.'

Saying 'shall' or 'let's'

To say a plain speech '**I shall**' or '**let's**,' for a u verb, add **oo** to the root. For example, *nomoo* = 'I shall drink' or 'let's drink.' For an ru verb, add **yoo** to the root. For example, *tabeyoo* = 'I shall eat' or 'let's eat.' For the three irregular verbs, say *ikoo* ('I shall go'), *koyoo* ('I shall come'), and *shiyoo* ('I shall do').

To say '**I shall**' or '**let's**' using masu verbs, change their endings to **shoo**. Using the same verbs mentioned in the previous paragraph, we get *nomimashoo*, *tabemashoo*, *ikimashoo*, *kimashoo* and *shimashoo*.

Saying 'try to do'

To express the idea '**try to do**,' use the plain 'let's' form of the verb followed by *to suru*.

For example, *oyoide kawa o wataroo to shimasu* = 'swimming, I will try to cross the river.' *Oyogu* = 'swim.' *Wataru* = 'cross.'

Tokoro and Bakari

Tokoro means 'place' or 'part.' For example, *ii tokoro desu* = 'it's a nice place.' In addition, there are other ways to use *tokoro*: *Hashiru tokoro desu* = 'he's on the verge of running.' *Hashitte iru tokoro desu* = 'he's in the process of running.' *Hashitta tokoro desu* = 'he just finished running.' In contrast, *Hashitta bakari desu* = 'he finished running a while ago.'

To report what you see as an **exclamation**, use the past plain speech tense of a verb. For

example, *kita kita* = 'it's coming, it's coming!' *Kuru* = 'come.' *Kita* = 'came.'

Imperative verbs

To form an **imperative verb**, for a u verb, add *e* to the root. For example, *nome* = 'drink!' For an ru verb, add *ro* to the root. For example, *tabero* = 'eat!' The three irregular verbs are *ike* ('go!'), *koi* ('come!') and *shiro* ('do!'). Suggested mnemonic: 'there's a white koi in the pond' (*shiro* = 'white'; *ike* = 'pond').

Causative verbs

With **causative verbs**, mark the person causing the action with *wa* or *ga* and the victim with *ni* or *o*. For a **u verb**, add *aseru* to the root. For example, *okusan ga kodomo ni tegami o kakaseru* = 'the honorable wife to the child will make write a letter.' *Kaku* = 'write.'

To form the **causative tense** with an **ru verb**, add *saseru* to the root. For example, *chichi wa ootoo ni yasai o tabesasemashita* = 'father to my younger brother made eat vegetables.'

The three irregular verbs are: *Ikaseru* = 'make go.' *Kosaseru* = 'make come.' *Saseru* = 'make do.' In colloquial speech, *aseru* can be shortened to *asu*; *saseru* can be shortened to *sasu*.

Passive verbs

In **English**, only **transitive verbs have passive forms**. For example, consider the sentence 'he wrote the book.' In this sentence, 'wrote' is a transitive verb, and 'book' is its object. Next think about the following sentence: 'The book was written.' In this sentence, 'book' is the subject, and 'was written' is a **passive** verb form.

In Japanese, when using a passive verb, mark **the person causing the action with *ni*** and **the victim with *wa* or *ga***.

To make the **passive** form of a **u verb**, add *areru* to the root, i.e., the pre-u form. For example, *kono kimono wa junkosan ni erabareta* = 'as for this kimono, by Junko, it was chosen.' *Erabu* = 'choose.'

To make the **passive** form of an **ru verb**, add *rareru* to the root, i.e., the pre-ru form. For example, *hiroshisan wa omawarisan ni kuruma o tomerareta* = 'as for Hiroshi, by a policeman the car was stopped on him' (on Hiroshi). *Tomeru* = 'stop,' transitive.

The passive forms of the three **irregular verbs** are *ikareru* = 'to go' (on someone); *korareru*, = 'to come' (on someone), *sareru* = 'to do' (on someone). For example, *yoru osoku tomodachi ni korarete komarimashita* = 'late at night by the friend he came on me and I was inconvenienced.' Another example: *Watashi wa, sensei ni, motto ji o kirei ni kaku yoo ni, chuui saremashita* = 'as for me, by the teacher, more to write characters cleanly she did a caution on me.'

In Japanese, both transitive and intransitive verbs have passive forms. The passive form of intransitive verbs may imply something **unfortunate**. For example, *juutai ni makikomareta* = 'to a (traffic) jam they got involved.' *Makikomu* = 'involve in.'

Alternatively, the passive form may be used to show **politeness**. For example, *keikosan ga koraremashita* = 'Keiko honorably came.' To use the passive form in this way is similar to using the truly honorific verb *irassharu* ('honorably come, go or exist'), but the passive form is not quite as polite as the honorific form.

Causative Passive verbs

The final tense we will cover in these lessons is the **causative passive tense**. There is nothing quite like this verb form in English. This tense is used to show that a victim is being forced to do something unwanted and thus suffers discomfort.

When using this form, mark **the person causing the action with *ni*** and **the victim with *wa* or *ga***.

To form the **causative passive** tense of a **u verb**, add *aserareru* to the root of the verb. (The suggested mnemonic is 'asteroid era rerun.') This may be shortened to *asareru*, except for verbs that end with *su*, like *hanasu*, which only accept the longer version. (The suggested mnemonic for *asareru* is 'asa rerun' or 'morning rerun.'). For example, *seitotachi wa nihongo no sensei ni sakubun o kakaserareru* = 'as for the students, by the Japanese language teacher, they will be made to write a composition.' *Sakubun* = 'composition.' *Kakaserareru* (think 'asteroid era rerun') may be shortened to *kakasareru* (think 'morning rerun').

To form the **causative passive** tense for an **ru verb**, add *saserareru* to the root. (The mnemonic is 'Saskatchewan era rerun.') For example, *Hanada san wa kachoo ni ocha o*

iresaserareru = 'as for Hanada, by the section manager, honorable tea she will be made to make.' *Ireru* = 'put in' and also = 'make tea or coffee.'

If we **re-write the previous sentence** using the **causative** tense, it becomes: *Kachoo wa hanada san ni ocha o iresaseru* = 'as for the section manager, to Hanada, honorable tea he will make her make.' Note that there is **almost no difference in meaning between the causative passive tense and the causative tense**. Of course, the **point of view is different**. In the causative passive sentence Hanada is the topic (the sentence is written from her point of view), whereas in the causative sentence the section manager is the topic (the sentence is written from his point of view). In addition, with the causative passive sentence we get a stronger sense that Hanada is uncomfortable with what she is being made to do.

The **causative passive** forms of the three **irregular** verbs are as follows: *ikasareru* = 'be made to go uncomfortably,' *kosaserareru* = 'be made to come uncomfortably,' *saserareru* = 'be made to do uncomfortably.' For example, *kodomo wa okaasan ni kaimono ni ikasareru* = 'as for the child, by the mother, for the purpose of shopping, he will be made to go.' (think 'morning rerun') *Imooto wa sensei ni gakkoo ni kosaserareru* = 'little sister, by the teacher, will be made to come to school.' (think 'Saskatchewan era rerun') *Yoko san wa iroiro na tetsudai o saserareru* = 'as for Yoko, various helps, she will be made to do.' (think 'Saskatchewan era rerun')

You may download the audio lessons that correspond to this grammar guide at japaneseaudiolessons.com. They are free of charge.